

A Healthier Iowa: One Community at a Time

Regional response exercise uses RAGBRAI scenario

It was the best of days and the worst of days. Apologies to Charles Dickens, but that was the reaction by many public health administrators and emergency management coordinators in Southeast Iowa Region 5 after they completed a region-wide functional exercise in March.

Called Cyclex09, the exercise was the culmination of a year's worth of planning by a team that included representatives from public health, community health centers and emergency management.

"The exercise certainly challenged us," said Des Moines County Emergency Management Coordinator Gina Hardin. "It gave us the chance to coordinate with our partners."

For four hours, health officials worked through the management of a RAGBRAI cycling event and the normal events that occur with that event. The scenario took a turn when reports of two confirmed cases of pneumonic plague were introduced.

The exercise was hatched from a regional meeting when grant funding became available. Highmark Associates, LLC from Ames was selected to assist the planning team. The Iowa-based company had worked with local agencies around central and southern Iowa in the past and came with good reviews. Base planning began before the contractor was selected and moved forward when the contract was awarded in late May.

The participants were able to test various communications avenues including the Health Alert Network, 800 MHz radio system, video conferencing equipment, phones and radios.

One lesson learned came when during the exercise a two-way radio in one county began to bleed over to another county that was dealing with a real-life emergency. By the end of the exercise, the problem was remedied. Marion County Public Health Administrator Kim Dorn and emergency management coordinator Jeff Anderson said it was much better it occurred before they ran in into trouble during an actual event.



Decatur County Public Health Administrator Shelly Bickel (center foreground) evaluates command center activities in Moravia. More than 600 participants in 17 counties took part in the exercise.

Agencies, community health centers, and hospitals were able to complete the exercise requirements from this year's preparedness grant while improving their coordination and testing of updated plans and procedures. The exercise also provided the organizations a chance to assess where they stood after six years of planning, training and exercises.

"The exercise was a great experience for us to communicate with our partners," said Appanoose County Administrator Sherry Middlebrook. "Having them across the table made coordination better."

The growth in the response capabilities of the community health centers and public health agencies has been immense. They have continued to work with their planning partners and used linkages to emergency management to assist in that growth. Residents of Southeast Iowa can rest assured that when disaster strikes, the health and emergency management community will be there to respond and recover from any calamity.

